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AT BOLER'S IN THE SEVENTIES

By EDWIN FORD PIPER

*Charm and riddle and second sight,
Spittle of frog, and swarming bees;
Bells in dreams, and mushroom blight;
Witchwork under the withered trees:
Messages from beasts and stones;
Bones — divinatory bones;
The grumbling and mumbling
Of subsoil crumbling.*

I

Under a deafening wind the road swung on
Between the hill and the November wood.
Out of the cloudy sky the roaring darkness
Plunged on my laboring horses; we drew near
A roadside light; my shouting brought the door
Wide open:

“Yes, and team and wagon, too.
The bridge is out. We thought it would be Rollin.”

The fire was gossiping on seasoned logs
To the company. Joe Boler, silent, massive,
With gray cathedral beard and Indian pipe
Uttering prodigious smoke; the daughter Julia
Lending a dreamy personality
To roads and weather holding back her man;
And — laughing wrinkles in a ruddy face,
Humanity triumphant, Mother Boler.

Our talk ran from the trifling to the strange,
 The wind consenting in the wintry wood
 To the powers of the night, the mystery of dreams.

II

The women listened in the shadowy kitchen
 To the muted tones of fire and simmering pot;
 Breakfast was ready. A sound of hurrying steps —
 The door swung wide:

“Father, where’s Rollin?

I’ve set his place. I heard him driving up
 Before the rooster crowed.”

“We dreamed it, Mother.

No sign of Rollin here. The sound was like
 His team. If something came it left no mark
 In the frost. And — Daughter — ?”

“Dad, I heard them —

Heard the horses; and the axle talking heavy
 Right past our door, and on — so slow and tired
 They sounded. Then I dreamed. I saw our wagon —
 And a man had a face like he was drowned —
 And wolves in the brush. And Rollin wasn’t there —
 But here . . . and so — ”

“I’m saddling up.”

The fog

Was turning into sleet. Joe Boler’s horse
 Carried him swiftly out of sight. And time
 Ran slow, and dragging minutes seemed familiar
 To wide-eyed watchers of the curving road.

Late afternoon, the wagon through the sleet
 Snailed darkly toward us. “It’s the saddle pony
 Hitched in — they’ve lost a horse . . . And Joe is
 driving.

Rollin — I see him now — back on the load —
 Propped up . . . He lifts his hand.”

The women ran
To help down Rollin.

“Got me through the shoulder.
Bleeds some. Old George is shot dead in the river.”

His bulk moved heavily with their arms about him:
“I’m stiff and cold. Go slow and easy — slow.”

III

The bragging fire flung our shadows back
To the rough-hewn wall; up from the dusky floor
The ruddy light increased on forms and faces.
Rollin lay on the lounge; and Julia, leaning
Above him like a mother whose lost child
Comes home from the dark forest, tenderly
Read every word and tone for deeper meanings —
Bruisings on body and mind: and momentarily
The wind shook every log of the house, and lulled
To the tune of rattling sleet, — and Rollin’s voice
Ran weak and boomed again:

“Good roads to Kearney;
Bad coming back. At stores, waited my turn —
People had come to stock up for the winter,
A hundred miles, like me.

“On the home road
I couldn’t make the camping spots. Old Mill
Had jumped her banks until the bottom land
Would mire down a frog. I had to wait . . .
The horses are too eager coming home;
Hold them, and hold them, or they get dog-tired.

“Yesterday sundown, I made Vestal Creek,
And found a gang there, three men and a team —
Bad lookers. So I gave the horses water,
And pulled on to Elk canyon, camped and baited,
And rolled into my blankets.

“Queer — that canyon.
Always a wind that’s noisy in the scrub;
And trees — I call them tired — twisting, twisting . . .

“Near morning I awoke, the wind was gone,
And the gully choking in a winter fog.
Old George had got his rope untied and come
To pull at my blankets . . . Something meant get up.
He lipped my sleeve, and all the wordless things
Lipping my mind made signal — time to go.
So, fed the team and boiled a little coffee;
Hooked up at daylight — half a mile of road,
And I heard gallopers coming behind, —
One — two — three — in the sleet.

“I showed the rifle —
Their guns went off. My answer touched one fellow:
And they hung shy for any ticklish driving —
Gully, or trees.

“The river was bank full.
The ruts were sleety ditches — and the team
Cavorting on the slope — and the wheels slipping . . .
They hit me. And a bullet sent George down,
Head under, splashing, struggling in the traces.
The freezing current swept us off the ford, —
We stranded on the island, and they found
I still could shoot.

“One brone ran riderless.
Wolves — wolves are making the man a funeral, —
Over by this time, — and the growling jaws
Tugging the joints apart . . .

“Other men vamoosed
Soon as Joe topped the bluff. . .

“An awful job
Getting the wagon out . . . and poor old George —
Come Spring, the water will run through his bones.”

The word was Julia's:

“Rollin, time for rest,
After the freezing river, and the hours
Of the long cold jolting miles, wounded.
Why was a bullet moulded to hit you, —
Or . . . Oh, my mind can see the horse,
Now while the storm and night are grinding
The grists of death — swept down the river
As you — if dreams —

“O Rollin, Rollin!”

Joe Boler's face was dim behind his smoke.
We heard the loose wind fighting helpless trees.

GOLDENROD

By SIDNEY DRAKE

The telephone bell jangled across the hot stillness of the room. Essie jumped. Her scissors clanged to the floor, and the spool of black sewing-silk unwound swiftly as it rolled from her lap to the edge of the rug.

It was the Hospital, brisk, tense. “Miss Taylor? Miss Florence Taylor?”

“No — no — Miss Taylor is — she isn't here — ”

“What? I can't hear.”

It never could! Essie stretched upward till her throat pulled. She felt as though she were screaming her answers, but still the Hospital didn't seem satisfied. “Miss Taylor isn't home. . . . Yes, she lives here — This is her sister. . . . Yes, she's a trained nurse — she's the one — but she isn't here *now*. . . . No — she isn't on a case. . . . Well — she isn't coming home to supper. . . . No — she's staying at some kind of meeting at a Hospital. . . . No — I don't know what one — I . . . Oh, yes, ma'am, if she calls up I'll tell her . . . Bel-

mont Hospital? Oh, Bellevue? Excuse me — yes, I'll tell her — ”

Essie hung up the receiver. The middy-tie she had been hemming was still in her hand. Quickly, because it was so easy to forget things like that, she wrote “Call Bellevue Hospital” on the little pad dangling beside the phone. Then she pushed the hair back from her forehead. It was sticky wet. So was the middy-tie where it had lain between the palm of her hand and the receiver.

She picked up the scissors and rewound the spool of silk. Her knees felt that horrid, soft way they always did after messages for Florence from the Hospital — or one of those jumpy doctors. No matter how hard she tried to think, whatever she said seemed to be wrong. Essie always felt that if she could have just a little more time she'd do it better, and Florence wouldn't think her quite so dumb. Maybe if she could reach the phone better — she was shorter than Florence, or even Vivian. Anyway, she remembered now that of course Florence wouldn't be able to take a tonsilactomy, or whatever they called it, tomorrow, because all those big men from New York and Chicago were coming down to a clinic at the University to see Florence's wonderful Dr. Greene fix Len Baker.

Essie couldn't for the life of her see why she hadn't remembered *that*, even over the phone. Because — poor Len Baker! — he wasn't just — words — like the rest of Florence's people, or the Hospitals or Dr. Greene. Len Baker was real. He'd even been in their house — lots of times. First, to see Florence about a job somewhere, and then about being “fixed” after Florence got interested in his “spells.” Why, Len Baker *lived* right over near the car-barns somewhere! She ought to have remembered that was tomorrow. Still, it wouldn't do any harm; Florence could call up and tell them herself. It wasn't like somebody dying. Sometimes it was that. Essie shivered. She always did when she thought about dying people, even on a scorching day like this.

Still standing, she finished hemming the middy-tie. "Poor Len!" she thought. Of course it would be wonderful to be fixed so he could get a good job like other folks and all. But — knives. And all those big, smart people watching — Essie shivered again. She liked Len, even if everybody did call him silly. Once, when he was waiting for Florence, they had played double solitaire. And he was good at it. But he said he never saw anybody get onto cards as quick as Essie.

She snipped off her thread, put the scissors and spool in the covered basket an old lady who died of cancer had once given, full of figs, to Florence, and carried the folded tie through to Vivian's drawer in the chiffonier.

Coming back, she glanced at the clock on the mantel above the gas logs. Even the *thought* of gas logs made her hotter than ever. It started that crazy notion in her head again — of getting outside, out where there was grass — a sort of picnic, maybe. Beyond the window above the table the air in the clattering street was heavy with September heat and dust and smoke. But the double-deckers took you to the end of town. And between that and the factories was an abandoned railroad track. Between the ties, goldenrod pushed up about this time of year. When the wind blew, yellow powder speckled the rusty rails.

Essie knew. She had been a stenographer in one of the factories twelve years before. An unusually poor stenographer. She knew that, too. But that was not why she had ceased crossing the abandoned railroad spur twice daily. She had married. Somehow, being married — just that, without reference to any particular man — had appealed to her far more than improving her speed at dictation. Florence had never been able to understand that. But Florence was different — every way — from Essie.

She passed behind the table with its square, nickle-bound aquarium, and reached for the curtain-cord to shut

out the swollen sun. On tiptoe, her forefinger barely slipped through the ring that hung motionless at the end of the cord. She bore down ineffectually. With a hideous whir the shade flew to the top of the high sash. The sun leered in at her. In the clatter she failed to hear the squeak of the screen door as it opened.

"Gee, Mom, it's sizzling in here. There's about an inch of breeze outside, but it's something fierce in here!"

Essie turned. Vivian, her daughter, was already taller, at eleven, than herself. Bigger-boned. When Essie helped her on with her coat sometimes, it was like putting it over the hanger — so hard and straight-out at the shoulders' ends. Essie's were narrow and soft and rounded a little. Florence was always at her to stand up straight. But when she tried, her stomach felt queer.

"I'm glad it's better out, Honey. I was thinking, Vee, maybe — it's Friday and you haven't got any lessons or gym or anything — maybe we might have a kind of picnic — like we used to sometimes — ? You know — a kind of picnic — ?" Her voice fluttered along, eager, apologetic. "The goldenrod's out, I guess. And I've got some cucumber sandwiches and nut-cakes all packed in a shoe-box. We wouldn't have to get home till dark — eight o'clock or so — because your Aunt Florence is staying on at the hospital for some kind of meeting — " Her voice lifted wistfully. "Don't you think it'd be kind of fun, Honey? If you'd rather have Nabiscos, there's some of them, too — "

Vivian had gone into the bathroom, and was splashing cold water over her face and throat. It kept running down perilously toward her round, starched collar, and as she talked she mopped vigorously with a bath-towel.

"Well — sure, Mom — I wouldn't mind — but Aunt Florence said I was to be at Warner's at four-thirty sharp to be fitted for my scout suit and hiking-boots."

"New ones?"

"Sure! What you think? I can't go out there to Scout Camp Monday looking like a sap."

Essie sat on the edge of the tub. "She never said anything to me about it. Don't wet your hair all down tight like that, Honey. Looks like a boy."

Vivian took a cup from a hook, filled it, drank, filled it again. "That's the way I like it. I hate girly things."

Essie didn't. But she never bothered to say so any more. She was only laughed at. Florence had always hated frills. In her uniforms, in her severe tailored suits, she seemed sometimes more a man than a woman. More a man than some men, almost — much more a man than Len Baker.

Vivian was cooled — ready to start out again. The shoe-box on the kitchen table halted her. "I could eat some before I go, though," she suggested.

Essie untied the string, lifted the bulging cover, unwound the oiled paper from a tottering stack of little cakes. Vivian munched contentedly, an eye on the clock.

"Gee, I hope I get enough to eat at camp. Aunt Florence says if I get twelve points, she'll let me go to Oakdale Camp for all next summer. The Riker girls go there — all the keen kids. Gee, I hope I can." She washed down the third cake. "I got to go now. Aunt Florence is letting me have this new suit made as short as that — " She raised the hem of her pleated skirt till it swung barely to her knee.

Essie was taking the sandwiches out of the box.

"Oh no, Vee! I think that's too short. You're getting so tall, you know. And your legs are so — "

"Yeh, I know I got fat legs. But gee, Mom, nobody cares. 'N' you can't do anything in skirts. I hate 'em. That's the best thing about camp — not having any. Anyway Aunt Florence says it's all right. She knows. She gets around more'n you do, and she's such a snappy dresser herself. Came in school yesterday, and all the girls were perfectly wild about her. Jen Perkins said she

thought I was a lot like her. Gee, I wish I was! Do you think I am? Any?"

She stooped to get her hat where it had rolled from the piano-bench. Essie stood in the doorway which divided the kitchen from the sitting-room. The table with the goldfish was between her and her daughter. A little snarl of soggy wind cut across the rooms. The end of the curtain-cord whipped against the glass. The oiled paper from the cookies rattled on the kitchen table.

"Yes," she said, and her voice was very tired, "you're a lot like her. Every way."

The girl whirled back from the door and threw her arms around Essie's neck. It was a rare gesture. She hated fussing. "Gee, I'm glad!" At the door a second time — "Did she tell you I was staying all night with her at the hospital?"

"No — she didn't tell me."

"There's a movie on bone-setting — and she said I could stay after. I've always wanted to. I adore going to the hospital! It smells so exciting. And everybody's so swell to me because I'm Miss Taylor's niece."

"Tell Aunt Florence that other hospital —" Essie glanced at the pad by the telephone — "the Bellevue — wants her. Remember? Sure?"

"Uh-huh. 'Bye."

The screen door twanged behind her. Essie stood crumbling a papery wafer down into the turgid water. The goldfish spun about foolishly. She wondered if it scared them. It was not the first time she had wondered. They were alone together a good deal — Essie and the goldfish. Hospitals! She shivered again. They *liked* hospitals — Florence and Vivian. *She* wouldn't go near one! Not for a million dollars! Not if she had to! But, of course, she had always been a scared-cat —

She went on into the back hall to get a stool. She couldn't reach the window-shade without it. Even with an umbrella. When she got to the stool, she sat down on

it. There was a mop on one side of her, and a basket of soiled clothes on the other. Essie didn't notice. A blotched bottle of blueing and two bars of yellow soap seemed to absorb all her attention. But she didn't see them. She kept seeing goldenrod. Yet she didn't care anything about goldenrod — really. Except that it was bright. Flowers had never mattered much to Essie. For that matter — if it were goldenrod she wanted — crouching there motionless between the mop and crumpled underclothing — there was nothing in the world to prevent her going for it. Florence wouldn't stop her. Florence never bothered to stop her from anything — since she had stopped her from staying married.

She had quite definitely stopped that. Before Essie had learned not to feel a little happy shiver in her spine when he came tramping — wet boots and all — into their one room. She knew of course that she *must* stop — since he had been proved a bigamist. But the other wife was so old and fat — it didn't seem to Essie to matter quite so — well, so quickly — as Florence had decided it should.

But since that — since Florence had assumed all responsibility for Essie and the distressingly imminent Vivian — there had been no particular argument between the sisters. So Essie might have wandered between the ties, sneezing out the pervasive pollen of the goldenrod any day after the housework was done. But it simply never occurred to Essie to go alone. So she never went.

It grew unbearably hot in the back hall. Essie could feel her clothes sticking to the melting varnish of the stool. She lifted the stool, and moved with it sidewise through the narrow door leading to the front room. The latch of the screen door on the porch had not caught when Vivian had whipped through it. Now it had swung open. Just over its threshold stood a tall man — young, with restless, pale eyes and thick mouse-colored hair. He pulled at his left coat-sleeve as though to stretch it to

cover the prominent wrist-bones of the long, restless arms.

Essie deposited the stool beneath the window.

"Why don't you sit down, Len? I didn't hear you knock or anything. Did you want to see Miss Florence? She's not coming home — not till tomorrow. Ain't it hot, though?"

At her voice, his eyes focused, smiled.

"Is it? I s'pose it is. I don't notice weather much, I guess."

With a timid glance around, he sat down on the piano-bench. Essie mounted the stool. Still the cord dangled beyond her finger's reach. Grasping the latch on the window-frame, she drew herself to the wide sill and with the left hand lowered the shade slowly to the desired spot. Perspiration breaking out on her forehead made tight curls of the stray hairs about her temples and ears. She turned with a smile. The man was pale as death. She ran over to him.

"Len? Len? What is it? Don't you feel good? If it's sunstroke — oh, what is it you do for sunstroke? Florence would know. Even Vivian — "

Color came creeping back to his thin cheeks.

"No — I ain't sick. Don't bother about me. It was just seeing you get up there!"

"Me?"

"So high. I can't stand high places. They make me sick all over." His hand, tugging at his sleeve, shook. "It don't matter if I say so — *You* know I'm a coward — you and Miss Florence."

"It's just you that says so. I never saw you act 'queer.' Lots of folks get dizzy about high places."

"You don't."

"Me? No, I just never think anything about it."

His strange eyes glowed with admiration as he looked up at her.

"You're so brave, Miss Essie."

Essie shot a quick glance behind her. Suppose Florence or Vivian heard that. How they would laugh!

"Me? Why — I'm just a scared-cat. Florence says I'd faint over a nosebleed. And I really don't like to stay alone nights. Things creak so."

She sat down in the rocker by his side. He sounded strangely fierce.

"You shouldn't have to stay alone. A young woman like you. They shouldn't let you."

She laughed. It was a hard, tired laugh.

"They? They'd sleep out on a mountain with just — guns." She shuddered. "They're always talking about it — Florence and Vivian. Planning to go West sometime — together."

Essie drew the work-basket from the shelf below the table. One of her own white lisle stockings lay in a limp coil on its wicker bottom. Spools of white, black, and brown cotton rolled together in a heap. She chose a needle from the heart-shaped cushion tied with a rosette to the side of the basket. She caught the rebellious strands in the long eye of the needle.

The man had ceased to pull at his sleeve. He leaned back against the piano. The keys protested discordantly. They both laughed. The sun had crept even below the lowered shade. It splashed squarely into the goldfish box.

After a little: "My sister used to sew," he said. "Pretty. Like you do."

"I like to sew." She rolled up the mended stocking. "But there ain't much to do — really. Florence wears wool ones most all the year. Sort of hard, ribbed cotton ones, even now when it's hot. And she keeps Vee in that sort, too. She says they're 'better bred' than cheap silk ones. But I always liked the feel of silk. She says women waste half their lives mending silk stockings." She fitted the cover of the basket carefully in its groove. "She's right, of course. Nothing ever needs mending

that she wears. Even the buttons don't seem to get loose on those men's shirts. And her uniforms are such strong stuff, they don't tear — hardly ever. And she buys Vee's things the same place. Just sweaters and skirts. Even now! I don't see how she stands it. I get so hot. But she won't listen to thin ruffy things. She nor Florence, either. I always liked summer clothes best. Even if it did mean getting a backache pressing them out all the time. I used to make them for Vee, anyway. And once I made a blue organdie for Florence — for her birthday. But they just hung in the closets till they got all grimy. I cut down the blue organdie and wore it out. But blue ain't good on me."

He was very quiet now. His eyes, resting on her small hands that still curved around the darning-basket, had lost their strange incoherence. His voice came soft and slow, like a relaxed child's.

"I like yellow best. It always seemed prettier to me than blue — or pink, even. Yellow dresses seem so sunny. Yellow flowers, too — "

Essie shoved her chair backward — out of the sun's path.

"Goldenrod's pretty, ain't it?"

"Goldenrod? I ain't much on names of flowers. Is it that tall, wavy stuff that has the yellow part all to one side of the stem, like?"

"Uh-huh. Comes out just about now — in September. Comes late — and don't last long."

His knowledge stimulated him. His voice took on a certain assurance.

"I know." He gestured eagerly. "Grows about so high. All around the edge of town. I used to bring it home from school. But it gave my sister hay-fever. So I couldn't any more."

"Is your sister dead, Len?"

"No. She got married and moved to Idaho. About ten years ago."

"And haven't you any one else? Not any one at all?"

"No. But it's all right, Miss Essie. I'm kinda glad. Because I can work enough to keep me fed — but with these spells, I can't ever amount to anything."

"Poor Len! But think!" She leaned toward him. "Tomorrow Dr. Emmet will fix you all up — so you won't have them any more. You'll be just like you were before you got hurt — maybe. Aren't you excited, Len? Florence is. She's going to give you the ether herself so as to be sure it's done just perfect." She touched his wrist in her eagerness. It was colder than ice. And damp. She felt the slight pulse leap, halt, jerk on again. She looked up quickly. His face was livid. The cords in his throat twitched.

"Don't, Miss Essie! Don't — don't let them do it! I can't go — I'd rather die than go to a hospital!" His fingers wove around hers. "Don't let them make me, Miss Essie — don't — "

"You mean — you don't want to be — fixed?"

"I don't want anything. I want to be let alone. I ain't hurting anybody. It's my own business — I want to stay like I am. What's it to them if I get dizzy and sick once in a while? See, Miss Essie — " his thin voice plead — "see — I'm better, anyway. It's been three months since I had the last one!"

The basket slipped from Essie's lap to the floor and went reeling to the wall.

"But, Len — the doctor?" she began.

"I've had enough of doctors. They make me cold all over. And Miss Florence too. She makes me cold. She — looks at me."

Essie nodded. She knew that keen impersonal look in her sister's gray eyes. It meant a "case."

"But Florence likes you, Len. She wouldn't hurt you. Why, see — Len — you're the only man she lets come here at all. She hates men. No — she don't hate them. She just thinks they're stupid and — unnecessary. She's

always saying how much better off we are — she earning more money than a man, and me being home without any man to bother — But she don't mind *you*, Len — see? She wouldn't hurt you."

His resentment died out. His shoulders sagged forward. His fingers unknotted themselves from hers.

"Aw, Miss Essie — I know I'm a fool. I s'pose I ought to be glad they're doing it. And not having to pay or anything. But I get so cold. Seems like I'd die of cold before tomorrow — "

"You don't need to go if you don't want to. They can't make you!" Essie spoke very decisively. The more so, that she was not at all sure. She watched his hand tugging at the frayed cuff.

"They will, too," he answered dully. "I can't talk up — to folks like that. I ain't got a show with — them."

Essie knew. She couldn't talk up either.

In her powerlessness, she grew bold, reckless.

"They can't either, Len Baker. They can't! I won't let them!" She sounded passionately assured. "*I'll* see to it! *I'll* take care of you!"

A flicker of hope lit the ash of his face. "Miss Essie! You won't let them? You'll — help me?"

His smile stimulated her. "Of course I will — don't you be scared."

"Aren't *you*?"

"Scared? Me? It'll be all right — " She hurried on. "You'll see." She moved swiftly from the low rocker to his side on the piano-bench. "You won't worry any more now, Len? Promise?"

Her face, small and sallow, was close to his. There was a shadow of down along the upper lip, and middle age lurked at the corners of the eyes. It was a negligible face.

The man's hungry eyes seemed to devour it. "You're — just — like God!" he whispered reverently. Then, be-

cause he could not bear the beauty, he let his own face fall to her lap. His eyes were moist upon her fingers.

Essie trembled. "Dear! — Len — dear! — don't — " She lifted one hand gently from beneath his face and ran it through his hair. "Were you so scared — Len? — So scared? — and so lonely? Essie'll take care of you — Essie'll take care of you. It's awful to be lonesome — Essie knows." Her fingers dropped into the depression between the tight cords of his neck. "You're too thin, Len. It's food you need — nice little homey, hot things — that's what you need — not operations. *Ain't* it? And somebody to care — and see to your clothes — "

He lifted his head. His eyes, his hands, were at peace.

"I don't believe I'd ever be queer if I could be around you — You make me feel like — somebody." He drew slightly away from her. "I'm ashamed, Miss Essie. Coming here and acting like a baby. But I'm all right now. I'm not scared any more."

Essie missed his face from her knees. Her fingers were wistful for his hair. A bar of sunlight with its dancing dust cut between them.

"I'm going to fix things for you to eat," she said, looking away from him.

"Here? — Oh, no, Miss Essie — I couldn't. Miss Florence wouldn't like it — "

"Not here — I'll come to your place. You've got a stove, haven't you?"

"A gas-plate. It ain't much good though. I mostly get things ready cooked."

Essie nodded. "That's what I thought."

"But — you can't. You can't come there."

"I can too. If I want."

"No — it wouldn't be right. And I couldn't — I'd see you around like that, fussing with stoves and dishes, and like — keeping house — "

"I'm not going to leave you alone any more," repeated Essie doggedly.

He jumped up and moved away from her. The telephone rang. He came close to her — very close — moved hurriedly away — “You don’t understand — I’d be — wanting you — I couldn’t stand it, your being so good to me — and so close — Not you! — I’d be — loving you — wanting you — ”

The telephone rang again, insistently — then was silent. Essie still stared at the aquarium. Her voice was low and slow.

“I wouldn’t mind — being wanted — ” she said. Then she was still.

Not so still somehow as the man. The paper on the kitchen table fluttered. Essie gave a little laugh.

“Len!” she cried — “would you like to go on a picnic? Just us? — *now*?”

Without waiting for his answer, she ran into the kitchen and stuffed the dishevelled cakes back into the shoebox. She fitted the cover and retied the string. Her face was flushed with heat and happiness. The man had not moved. Essie darted into her bedroom. Several minutes passed. When she reappeared, a wide hat flapped above her steaming face. She had changed her dress. This one was yellow. It had many ruffles, and much coarse lace. The man’s eyes, vague no longer, glowed with delight.

“Pretty!” he said. Then, with a marvelling little sigh as he took from her the shoe-box with its dangling string: “You always know just what to do — about everything.”

He watched her closing things — setting the latch of the door. “Is there time?” he ventured.

A quite alien assurance had descended upon Essie. “It won’t be really dark for two hours. We’ll take the bus out. So’s to get where there’s grass and all — quicker — ”

The haunted look leapt back into his eyes. “The bus?” he faltered.

“Yes. Why? Why not? — I’ve got some money.”

He reddened. "I didn't mean that. But this time of day — if they're crowded — sometimes you have to go on top. It's so high!" Then suddenly a smile swept away the last shadow of fear. "But that's all right," he finished happily. "I'm not afraid this time. I don't believe —" he followed her out the door — "— I'll be afraid even of — them — tomorrow —"

From force of habit, Essie slipped the key behind the letter-box. Though, she thought, even if it should be morning — even then, she'd be home before the others —

It was nine o'clock that evening when Essie opened the door again, and blinked stupidly in the sudden light of the sitting-room. Florence looked up from her book and laughed through a comfortable yawn.

"You look like an owl. Where on earth have you been?"

Essie dropped her hat on the table. "I thought you weren't coming home."

"I wasn't. But they postponed the lecture. And I thought I'd better tend to getting Len Baker to the hospital in the morning. He might not even appear — left to himself; and two brain specialists from Chicago will be here for it — besides all the students, of course. Where've you been?"

Essie moved toward the kitchen, glanced in.

"Did you find the salad all right in the ice-box? And the cakes?"

"Yes. We managed. Trust us!"

"Vee in bed?"

"Just."

"I'll wash up."

Essie took her apron from the back of the door. As she drew it on over the many ruffles, her hand brushed against an indefinite, soft something at her waist. It was a drooping feather of goldenrod — bruised now, and

blackening. Slowly it slipped from her fingers into the waste-box by the sink.

Florence had risen. She crossed the kitchen to the sleeping-porch, loosening the leather strap of her wrist-watch beneath her starched cuff.

"I'm turning in," she said with an unstified yawn.

Essie was sliding the several plates into the dishwater. They clattered against the edge of the pan as though her hand trembled. There was a starkness in her voice.

"Len Baker's dead," she said.

Florence wheeled. "Dead? Len Baker? Len *Baker*? Why — it's not possible. Where on earth did you hear such a report? Why — everything's all ready! Are you sure? Dead — ?"

Essie nodded. Her back was toward her sister. The mop whisked foamy streams over the plates and cups. A sudden spurt of suds shot over the pan and down the front of her apron.

"He got killed."

"Killed? How?"

"Getting down off a bus at Fifteenth. He got sort of — dizzy, I guess. A taxi hit him in the back. It wasn't the cabman's fault though — "

"No — probably not. Poor Len. Poor thing. He just didn't have sense. Perhaps it's just as well. I doubt if even the operation would have helped — permanently. I must 'phone the hospital. — You happened to be there?"

"Yes. I — happened to be there — Then I went along to the hospital — "

"Which?"

"I don't know. It wasn't far from Fifteenth — "

"Bellevue — ?"

"I guess so — I thought maybe he might need me — " With a crazy sort of carefulness she balanced the soapy plates in the wire drainer.

A half-smile curled her sister's lip upward. "You

dear little goose! What could you have done? In an emergency operating room? And in *that* dress!"

Essie poured a pitcher of clear water over the plates in the drainer. When the pitcher was empty she still moved it back and forth above the plates — pouring —

"Well — " — her voice was dim, toneless — "he didn't. He didn't need me — any — after all — "

She stepped back into the sitting-room and switched off the light. The glow from the kitchen fell on the scratched stool, still standing beside the window. The polished top of the piano-bench shone faintly below the white, uncovered keys. The dark walls made mirrors of the glass sides of the aquarium. In one corner, suspended ever so slightly above the fluted shell, the four goldfish, gills touching, lay like a spread fan — motionless.

TRANSIENT

By TED OLSON

We wondered, even while we jested
On tramps grown reticent and aloof,
Why he so urgently requested
The naked room beneath the roof.

True, there were gulfs of emerald distance
Beyond the window. But the heat
Throbbed with a hammer's iron insistence,
And night was sly with rodent feet.

He merely shrugged aside our warning.
"Don't bother; I shan't mind," he said.
We understood, too late, next morning,
How little he minded. He was dead.

When there's no cure in tears or laughter
Any room will serve man's use
If there be only beam or rafter
Round which to fix the noose.

TWENTY-SECOND SPRING

By A. K. LAING

When I have torn more leaves from calendars
Than future calendars will have me tear,
At last admitting that the quiet stars
Lie years beyond my leaping in the air,
Yet nearer than they ever were in youth,
I shall be quiet too, and I shall find
My world-embracing journey after truth
Turns inward on the roadways of the mind.

Still the way wanders down the breast of Earth;
But there must be an end to earthly travel
When far horizons seem of little worth
And feet are wearied by the bruising gravel,
When dangers fail to make the nostrils quiver
And start the knees a-shivering instead,
And tavern nights wreak havoc with the liver
And set an anvil clanging in the head.

When in the afternoon of middle age
Over the world the evergreens are graying,
I shall put on the cassock of a sage
And possibly experiment with praying.
Then I shall substitute the cabin fire
For jack-o-lantern burning on the mast
And, poking at the ashes of desire,
Read in the book of reverie at last.

These things shall I remember, growing old:
May like a mantle over Hanover,
Struck by the sunlight into green and gold;
And, with the Autumn turning wanderer,
October flinging scarlet on the hills
When through the college everywhere one sees

Brown jugs of cider on the windowsills,
And silver music hurries with the breeze.

I shall recall a brook that flowed between
Two skies and four bright rows of sycamores,
Meandering to meres where willows lean
In meditation by the crumbling shores;
And the salt-heavy ocean wind at dawn
Combing the wild hair of the ocean spray,
Crying that strength and beauty may be one,
Veering from sunrise in the wake of day.

Always at sound of hooves I shall remember
A lonely horseman breaking through the dark
High over Norwich in the chill November,
Seeking the solitude of skies to mark
How the sun-sandals of Orion flare
Over the sky-line with his hounds in cry;
Then bridling west again to notice where
Brilliant Arcturus pediments the Y.

There will be afterthoughts of cloudy peaks
Seen through the ragged ribbons of the rain;
And snatches that the voice of sorrow speaks,
Great lines that sang themselves into my brain
In bitter rhythm with the first heartbreak:
"Oh, thou art fairer than the evening air."
All through the night I heard them, lying awake:
"Ah! were she pitiful as she is fair."

When lack of lands to learn and seas to sail
Some day has brought me to the ingle chair,
Weary of seeking some forgotten grail
Filled with the fragrance of a woman's hair,
My mind will turn to twenty-one again
And carry to the final resting place,
Oh, beautiful beyond the dreams of men,
The unforgotten beauty of one face.

Forever young, forever bright and fair,
Free of the turning cycle of the cold,
She walks with April always in her hair;
She has the gift of never being old,
In memory. When thought of her goes past
Stoop over me to see the light go gray
In eyes where night lies quietly at last,
Beyond all dreams of day.

LE BONNET ROUGE

By GRACE STONE COATES

My sister had a red hat, a gay little cheap thing that called a flush to her cheeks, and brightened her somber face. Its adventurous color must have summoned her spirit, too, and set her for the moment out of character; for I had known her only as a harassed, tigerish, affectionate big sister, my scourge and my refuge, three years my senior and already fifteen.

Teresa was my "big" sister by courtesy only, for my blond head overtopped her dark one by two inches, and at times my dignity seemed older than her darting eagerness.

On this day of high adventure, when the little hat seduced her, household matters had moved with unwonted smoothness. Teresa had risen early and done the washing; had baked and scrubbed and prepared lunch — with little help from me, probably, for she cherished a mysterious conviction, belied by life, that I was not meant for such tasks. She had slipped through the day with no outbursts of nervous fury, brought on by overwork, which often dragged everyone around her into a vortex of emotional high pressure. Three o'clock came. The work was done, and Teresa was serene.

"Now," she said, "I will hurry and dress, and we will take a walk."

Occasional strolls together were the delight of our hearts. These walks had only one drawback. Teresa's preoccupations made her negligent of hairpins, hatpins, and the security of petticoats. At any moment when we were together on the street, my snug barrette might be commandeered to anchor a swart queue rolling unexpectedly down her back. My hatpins were at the mercy of her necessities; and all too often, with shame in my cheeks, I had been called on to pin up her ruffles in public. This was a double bitterness to me, because both disposition and leisure gave me to the street groomed and impeccable; but my sarcasm availed nothing against her miserable habits.

She had been at her "dressing" but a moment, when she emerged for the street, the jaunty hat a bit askew, and an unusual air of competence upon her.

"Did you remember your garters?" I asked anxiously.

"Certainly. You needn't be hateful!"

I held my breath, fearful for the fragile joy of the day; but she had not taken offense, and we were off.

"Where are we going?"

"A new place," Teresa answered, with a finality that forbade questions.

We trotted along, Teresa's animated face upturned to mine while she expounded to me the marvel of the sun that is Sirius. (Our father was a writer and our mother a chemist; and against all our childhood wrongs I set this, that our casual family conversation never descended to the level of our neighbors' clotheslines!) Suddenly, — puff! — a gust of wind lifted the little hat and set it lightly beyond a picket fence.

The fence pickets were too close-set for us to crawl through, and too sharp to climb. At last we found a stick, and with much patient leaning and fishing recovered the truant bonnet. Teresa examined it tenderly, and found it unhurt.

"Give me a hatpin," she demanded.

For once I rebelled. I had only one pin in my own hat. I expostulated. I argued. Why was it any worse for her to lose her hat than for me to lose mine?

"Yours is old and mine is new," she countered.

"Hold it on, then!" I retorted.

"I guess I'll have to," she agreed, "but my arms are tiredder than yours."

There was justice in this, and my conscience stung me as we went on. To shake off discomfort I asked again, "Where are we going?"

"We are going to dine at Blaker's restaurant," she answered impressively.

The splendor of her language, even more than the splendor of the undertaking, awed me. After a time I whispered, "Have you money?"

"I have," she answered firmly; and opening her water-reddened little claw she disclosed a quarter. I had noted before, with disapproval, that her right hand was tightly clutched, but attributed its grip to her handkerchief which she always carried rolled in the smallest possible compass, having no flair for a gesture or a flourish.

We reached the restaurant, and paused an instant before Teresa plunged through the swinging door. Behind her, I was conscious of a dazzling blur of mirrors, napery, and silver; and then the quiet-stepping waitress was seating us.

Teresa settled herself with determined composure, and laid all her cards on the table in the shape of one moist coin. "If we both have soup will it be more than a quarter?"

"It will be twenty cents," the waitress answered. There was something indefinably sympathetic and reassuring about her voice.

It was not an hour for fashionable dining. Only two guests, across the room, leaned at leisure and gave their attention to each other. The solitude, the kindly waitress, the certainty of ample funds gave us aplomb.

"If we eat slowly," my sister said, "we will be here a long time."

Soon we were chatting happily over the soup. Teresa suggested that if we knew all — all — about any one thing we would necessarily know all about everything. I demurred, and she insisted. "We would. We would," she repeated vehemently; and at her final emphatic nod — *plop!* — the little red demon of a hat plumped itself upside down in her plate of soup.

Sickness of mortification rolled over me in waves. I saw her incredulous horror as, spoon suspended, she gazed into a cavernous lining of black sateen. My eyes turned to see if others were watching, and my chagrin was swept away in indignation. The two across the room were laughing! Laughing — at my dear sister! — when she was in trouble! She must not see them!

Quietly I reached across the table and lifted the dripping hat, smiling as I did so into her tragic eyes. "I *wanted* that soup! I *wanted* that soup!" she wailed.

Even as she spoke the gentle waitress was at our table, leaning deferentially at Teresa's elbow. "I shall bring Madame another plate of soup. There will be no charge. And let me brush Madame's hat and hang it by the mirror, where she can see easily to put it on."

Oh, blessed understanding of a child's heart! Magic solace of the word *Madame*! No *Madame* need let hot tears roll down her angry cheeks! *Madame* would not be discomfited at so slight a contretemps! Tears and flush receded. "Madame" was herself again.

As our gracious waitress placed the second service, with just the right degree of comforting solicitude, my sister said earnestly: "We have a nickel left. I think, on the way home, I shall invest in a hatpin."

TWO POEMS

By V. VALERIE GATES

MIRACLE

Kezia sat in an apple tree crotch,
Kezia was only seven,
But she was thinking grown-up thoughts
Of men and of gods and of heaven.

Kezia thought a mighty thought
That wrinkled her forehead fine,
And she cried through the leaves of the apple tree,
"If you're there, God, give a sign!"

Kezia shut tight her sea-green eyes,
And lo, a wind from heaven
Dropped the reddest apple in her lap.
Kezia was only seven.

TRAIN SONG

These are the men who have laid their lives
Under the white-ribbed track,
They beat them down with the iron spikes
And never could take them back.
Their bodies have known the crushing arms
Of the giant singing wheels,
They talk to the mighty trains that ride
Over the rails of steel.
Their hearts live in the grey smoke
That troubles the window pane
When you press your face against the glass
Of the whispering, throbbing train.
They were the brawn of the nation's arm
With eyes so serene and wise
That they smiled when they laid their bodies down
To be crucified under the ties.

CLOSED DREAMS

By IRENE STEWART

She follows me so gently with her eyes,
And sits so quietly I half forget
I've grown accustomed to her vague surprise
And her same question, "Is it spring-time yet?"
She asks for what she has — but then she's old,
And like a babe, suspects no ironies.
Her hair is thin, her gnarled hands dry and cold.
She lives a life of nebulous surmise.

Sometimes I think of doors that softly close
Along a corridor that leads to sleep;
A hush of dust, a calm that calmer grows,
Deep twilight that forever grows more deep;
Then, like a knock upon old doors too set
To creak, the whisper — "Is it spring-time yet?"

BRIEF REVIEWS

A Manifest Destiny, by ARTHUR D. HOWDEN SMITH. (Brentano's, \$2.50.) This bulky volume fulfils nearly every convention of the historical novel. Indeed, it contains little of character or incident that is not conventional, and much that is vexatiously so. But it is commendable in its clear and accurate record of the fascinating career of Walker, the filibuster, and of the relation of his expeditions to national and international politics. The reader of this novel will do well to turn from it to the memorable poem of Joaquin Miller, "With Walker in Nicaragua," for another portrait of one of the most picturesque figures in American history.

The events of the present winter in Nicaragua lend an especial timeliness to Mr. Smith's presentation of the earlier relations of that country to the United States.

J. T. F.

Tropic Death. By ERIC WALROND. (Boni & Liveright, \$2.50.) Such originality as this must, in the nature of the case, be very rare. In the first place, the subject matter of *Tropic Death* is unusual: it deals with Negro life in Panama and the Barbadoes — chiefly with the life and surroundings of “the dusky peons of those coral isles in the Caribbean ruled by Britain, France, and Holland.” In the second place the style is one which Mr. Walrond has, apparently, wrested with sweat and travail from the common materials of speech. “I will not let thee go,” he has said to his language angel, “until thou bless me.” Whether the blessing has been given may sometimes be doubted. When the child kicks “out of its mother’s hand the toy she locomotioned before it,” the reader decides that the angel has not been wrestled with enough; but there are passages — and not a few — in which I for one find the style very perfectly wedded to the sense.

As the title indicates, these tales are deeply tragic, and the tragedy is chiefly that of place. The book’s colors are black and crimson — the black of horror and death, the crimson of fever and bestially shed blood. The fact that most of the characters are Negroes seems far less important in these stories than the cruel truth that they are human beings in impotent subjection to ignorance and lust and heartless labor conditions and the Tropics. Which leads me to remark that we have no writers with a finer gift of objectivity than Mr. Walrond.

This book places its author among the leaders of the new Negro literature. He is business manager of *Opportunity*, *A Journal of Negro Life*; and I am glad, by the way, to find this occasion to remark that *Opportunity* is one of the most interesting and excellent periodicals that I have the pleasure of seeing. Charles S. Johnson and Countée Cullen are its editors, and its pages are filled with good articles, editorials and verse.

F. L. M.

An Old Man’s Folly, by FLOYD DELL. (Doran, \$2.00.) Floyd Dell’s new novel is largely a rehash of previous work, and, like most warmed-over things, shows deterioration. The beginning goes back to the youth of the old man, Mr. Windle, so that we may understand his later aberrations. This survey of his thwarted youth and bewildered maturity is easily the best part of the book. Thence Mr. Dell progresses hastily to the time, seemingly as remote, when America entered the war. He gets a great thrill out of detailing the oppression of the pacifists and the ardent labors of his young heroine in behalf of the Peace

Society, but his emotion is not contagious. All the while Mr. Windle dodders sentimentally out and in. But the poor old man, mercifully perhaps, does not live to see his two daring young radicals as we see them last, snugly tied down by marriage, an editorial job, two babies, and a home in the wilds of New Jersey — and “terribly happy about it.” *Sic transit* — but like Susan Beaver we must not “expect Joe and Ann Elizabeth to go on being radical hero and heroine the rest of their lives. They were, after all, mere mortal creatures.” Obviously Mr. Dell considers radicalism as something like measles: a temporary departure from the normal.

E. P. F.

Wedlock, by JACOB WASSERMANN. (Boni and Liveright, \$2.50.) That this is a thesis novel is indicated by the title, and the preliminary impression is abundantly justified. There is too much of thesis in the book. The writer's didacticism overflows in the conversation of his characters, and we have page-long speeches devoted to the elaboration of the central idea. It cripples and coerces the action, and distorts the characterization. Briefly stated, Wassermann's thesis is that marriage, in post-war Europe, is an unstable institution. This is scarcely an original discovery. And judged by the standards of the thesis novel, this book falls short because it offers no general solution — or only a vague and fantastic hint of one. The reader turns gladly from thesis to people. There is really magnificent characterization here, in spite of the distortion which I have mentioned. Herr Fraundorfer is a figure that will haunt the memory. To me almost the finest work in the book lies in the presentation of the two young girls, Relly and Marlene: extraordinarily delicate, profoundly persuading. The portrayal of Louise, the actress, is terrible in the finality of its comprehension. And Laudin himself and Pia, his wife, in the intricacies of their relationship and its final hopeful adjustment, are very significant and very real.

J. T. F.

The Romantic Comedians. By ELLEN GLASGOW. (Doubleday, Page, \$2.50.) This latest novel by the versatile Miss Glasgow has for theme the attitude toward love and marriage in this era of dissolving moral sanctions. To work out this theme Miss Glasgow takes a very small group of the aristocrats of a Virginia village and contrasts the old with the young, even to the extent of marrying Annabel, a charming girl who says very frankly, “I have no moral sense, but I have a heart,” to old Judge Honeywell, a distinguished lawyer and faithful vestryman of sixty-five

springs. Miss Glasgow watches with amusement the antics of her comedians, so obsessed with love and its humors and agonies; she is clever and ironical and suave. She has no thesis, but it is significant that tragedy runs close to comedy in the end: not quite all is well with modern love, and the people become Romantic Tragi-comedians. But doubtless all lovers are tragi-comedians.

I found many chuckles in the leaves of this book. Miss Glasgow shows herself a first-rate ironist; there is not a little Meredithian here. The most engaging character is the judge's twin sister, who having fallen from the grace of the Age of Innocence, like Mrs. Wharton's Mme. Olenska or Mr. Van Vechten's tattooed countess, is now very diverting as

"The lady with a record
Whose career was rather checkered."

Her disgracefully healthy appetite, her prizing of her "legendary vices," and her frankness are all amusing. "I have lived what I suppose you would call a fairly respectable life with four husbands," she says to her brother. "I had spirit enough in the beginning not to be ruined, and, of course, that was an offense against your social tradition. . . . When the Lord let me be born in America in the Nineteenth Century, He gave me a skin thick enough to survive it."

Not a very important book, perhaps, but amusing, and an interesting comment on modern society. F. L. M.

BIOGRAPHICAL

The work of GRACE STONE COATES has appeared from time to time in *THE MIDLAND* as well as in other periodicals. Her home is in Martinsdale, Montana.

SIDNEY DRAKE is the pen-name of a writer who has published rather widely and has lived in New Jersey, Colorado, California, Indiana, Pennsylvania, southern France, and Washington, D. C. V. VALERIE GATES is a student at the University of Michigan.

A. K. LAING's home is at Pelham Manor, N. Y. He has published verse in many of the poetry magazines; his "Prescription for an Egotist" in our December number will be remembered. TED OLSON, after a varied newspaper experience, is now connected with a paper in his native city of Laramie, Wyoming. EDWIN FORD PIPER is an associate editor of *THE MIDLAND*, and his work is familiar to our readers. Macmillans are bringing out a new volume of his this Spring, to be called *Paint Rock Road*. IRENE STEWART's home is at Eugene, Oregon.

